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ABSTRACT

Meeting together as a family group for discussion and/or activities is the best way of establishing and maintaining a system of free-flowing, snag-proof family communication. Once a family starts meeting together, a sense of purpose and direction is needed. Adherence to four concepts becomes important: dialogue democracy, reasoned revealing, pressureless persuasion, and self solving. When dialogue is democratic, when there is self-revealing without ulterior motives, when persuasiveness never includes pressure tactics, and when people are allowed and encouraged to make decisions and to solve problems through their own initiative, many benefits are attained. Putting these concepts into practice during regular family conferencing keeps communication flowing, is an effective means of preventing and solving problems, and promotes the attainment of familyhood. In almost every type of situation, family conferencing is more efficient and more effective than other forms of dialogue, such as conversations sandwiched in at mealtimes, during television viewing, while riding in the car, or when passing through the hallway. Children raised with the spirit of familyhood tend to become socially adaptable, expressive, emotionally resilient, intellectually curious, creative, self-motivated, and self-responsible. Parents who meet regularly with their youngsters and experience the dynamic flow of ideas and feelings need never worry about being labeled as "uncaring." (RH)

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ATTAINING FAMILYHOOD

THROUGH FAMILY CONFERENCING

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The family: pillar of society; cornerstone of our civilization. Its prestige transcends cultural and political differences. The family has always been with us, and we take for granted that it will always survive. Whenever a single family perishes in a natural disaster, newspaper headlines scream out the tragedy. Yet as countless families are now weakening and collapsing from unnatural disasters: the pressures and ills of our modern society, barely a whisper can be heard.

Everyone agrees that the main purpose of the family is to nurture and guide children in their growth toward adulthood. Webster doesn't even bother to mention that purpose in his dictionary definition. It seldom comes up during courtship, nor does it get much of the spotlight at the marriage altar or in the maternity ward. As their little ones begin to grow, however, some mothers and fathers have the wisdom to attend child rearing workshops. Yet their numbers constitute a very small minority of all parents.

A taken-for-granted attitude about parenting can be dangerous. Those who are satisfied with the job done by their parents will tend to repeat the same child rearing pattern. While this may turn out well for some, it will bring complications for others. What worked nicely in a rural setting may flounder in an urban one. What made sense a generation ago may be archaic today. And one's spouse, more often than not, will have different ideas about parenting philosophy and techniques.

Those unhappy about the way they were raised will vow not to repeat the same mistakes. But unless they have learned to understand and profit from this experience, they will either slip into the same pattern of parental behavior, or go to the opposite extreme and create a whole new set of

problems for their children to struggle with.

Raising children is a business. It differs from a retail business in two important ways. First, the retail businessperson foresees the consistent making of money, whereas parents envision the consistent spending of money. And second, a successful business operation will result in the entrepreneur's role getting larger and larger, whereas successful parenting will result in the parent's role getting smaller and smaller.

Business owners understand that a good deal of patience and effort is needed to make a new business enterprise prosper. This often translates into long hours standing over the counter and pouring over the books. No amount of extra hours put in, however, can make up for a lack of business know-how.

The same is true for raising children, which is always time consuming, and which requires the right kind of parental know-how in order to be successful. Central to this is knowing how to establish and maintain a system of free-flowing, snag-proof communication. Among the major tasks are to create quality time for dialogue, to set an example of openness and honesty, and to be careful not to stand in the way of youngsters' ever increasing need to move toward self-sufficiency.

The most effective and efficient vehicle for establishing such a system is meeting together as a family group for discussion and/or activities. This is Family Conferencing. Conferencing works best when it is done on a regular basis, such as weekly, and when spot meetings are convened to discuss of-the-moment issues.

The formal family meeting has several advantages over catch-as-catch-can discussions. Among them are its relative freedom from distraction, and its allowing space for issues to surface which would otherwise remain hidden. Also, having a regular gathering together time helps everyone to see that communicating has special value, and needs to have effort put into it.

Once a family starts meeting together, a sense of purpose and direction is needed. Without it, the sessions may soon fall victim to aimless wandering, dead-end arguing, or awkward silences. This will quickly dampen the spirit of enthusiasm. In order to get on the right track and stay on it, it is important to adhere to four concepts. These are the Cornerstones of Constructive Family Living. These concepts are simple in nature, yet require continuing awareness and effort in their application. The following is a brief outline of each:

1) DIALOGUE DEMOCRACY: The expression of thoughts and feelings is a basic human need, and should not be made a privilege granted in greater measure to those with more responsibility and decision making power. Parents will be respected for consistent enforcement of reasonable rules, but a double standard relating to speech will create resentment and lead to serious blocks in communication. We all take pride in the freedom of speech in our political democracy, and should cherish the same type of freedom of speech in the family.

2) REASONED REVEALING: When parents are open about themselves, their children will naturally follow suit. Consistent sharing of one's ideas, feelings, and experiences is highly educational, tends to foster mutual understanding, and keeps misconceptions from springing up. Revealing is reasoned when it is free of ulterior motives, when the speaker is sensitive to the receptivity of the listener, and when there is an atmosphere for switching back and forth comfortably between the roles of speaker and listener.

3) PRESSURELESS PERSUASION: Children are most receptive to parental persuasion at an early age, and will remain open to it all through the growing up years unless they are subjected to pressure tactics. A constructively persuasive parent wants children to feel free to make decisions in situations that do not involve obligation. The persuasiveness which flows

from healthy communication is far more powerful and productive than "victories" achieved through guilt, intimidation, bribes, or simply wearing others down.

4) SELF SOLVING: Children begin to make independent decisions, and to solve problems and challenges from a very early age. A good self-image develops when they are allowed and encouraged to expand this process to an ever-increasing degree in every aspect of their lives. Learning from open discussions is the best form of prevention of problems and mistakes, but even when mistakes are made, valuable growth can come from the experience. Being shielded from realities and protected from getting into difficult situations are growth inhibiting. Parental fostering of self-solving skills often involves their being an advice-giver, encourager, or helper, but never entails their taking over the major share of responsibility in their children's activities.

Putting these four Cornerstone Concepts into practice during regular Family Conferencing keeps communication flowing, and is an effective means of preventing and solving problems. Along with these benefits, something even more exciting begins to take place. This is the attainment of familyhood.

Brotherhood and sisterhood are present in groups of people bound by mutual caring and a common purpose, be it business, educational, political, social, or spiritual. In a family that has developed the spirit of familyhood, that same caring and common purpose can be found. Family members enjoy one another's company, yet respect individuality and self-determination. Learning, change, and growth are always present, along with support of one another, even if different interests take people in opposite directions.

Children raised with the spirit of familyhood have their share of problems like anyone else, and are not likely to be perfect angels. They do, however, tend to develop certain traits which make them stand out. The fol-

lowing are some examples:

SOCIALLY ADAPTABLE: They fit comfortably into peer group activities without being slavishly conformist, and enjoy their own company as well. Their friendship is highly valued, as they are good at listening and understanding.

EXPRESSIVE: They tend to be animated and have a good command of the language. They are spontaneous about their feelings, opinions, and needs.

EMOTIONALLY RESILIENT: They bounce back well from disappointments and hurts, as they have learned to talk about what bothers them, and trust that others will listen and care.

INTELLECTUALLY CURIOUS: They put other people's ideas to the test of their own judgment instead of using blind acceptance. No subject scares them away from inquiry. They tend to have many and varied interests, wanting to know why things happen and how they work.

CREATIVE: In an atmosphere of intellectual and emotional freedom, these children's interests and talents easily surface. An encouraging attitude from parents helps the creative energies flow freely.

SELF-MOTIVATED: They may not follow in their parents' footsteps, or fulfill their preconceived expectations, but these youngsters know what they themselves want to do. They develop the discipline and patience needed to reach their goals.

SELF-RESPONSIBLE: They take pride in their independence, feel pleased about achievments, and are willing to assume responsibility for their mistakes. Their problem solving skills bring a great sense of accomplishment.

Teenagers are well known for spending hours on the phone chatting with friends. Some parents end up setting time limits or banning use of the phone altogether, as they feel that time is being wasted, and fear that homework will suffer. These parents seldom appreciate that their youngsters are so prolific at communicating, and they have learned not to ex-

pect that much of that communication will come their way. It is described as the generation gap or adolescent rebellion, and many parents accept it as being normal. These parents are sadly mistaken. If they had been practicing regular Family Conferencing (the toddler stage is not too early to start), achieving the spirit of familyhood, they would find these teens to be as open and honest with them as with their peers. In fact, because of the valuable experience of the parents, and the trust built up over the years, the teen-parent communication can be of much higher quality.

GETTING ON THE FAMILY CONFERENCING BANDWAGON

Once the concept of Family Conferencing is explained and understood, it is hard to imagine any serious argument against it. But is meeting together as a family really necessary? . . . . . No, of course it's not. Countless families survive without it, and some of those families have outstanding systems of communication.

The question is not whether Family Conferencing is necessary, but whether the benefits derived from it are worth the effort put in. An activity's being beneficial is no guarantee that it will be put into practice. It must compete with activities that are fun, such as throwing a party, those that are relaxing, like novel reading and T.V. viewing, and those that are obligatory, working and sleeping heading this list.

There is universal agreement that getting regular exercise is highly beneficial. It builds strength and endurance, while helping guard against atrophy and disease. It is particularly important in this era of sedentary living. And while increasing numbers of adults are getting out the sneakers, a substantial majority don't exercise at all, or give it up after brief flings at it.

Why aren't more people engaging in this healthful activity? In addition to taking time away from other pursuits, it requires lots of effort, especially at first. It can even lead to soreness and pain. Then too, the benefits are not immediately apparent. But perhaps the biggest reason of all is that people can live without it. It isn't that they don't get any exercise at all. Physical energy is expended in rising up from bed, getting in and out of the car, and racing back and forth between refrigerator and easy chair during T.V. commercials.

Everyone also agrees that taking the time to communicate as a family is most praiseworthy. It fosters emotional strength and resiliency, while

protecting against communication atrophy and interpersonal conflict. It is especially important in this era of working mothers and blended families. The family meeting is getting increasing mention in parenting books and courses, but only a very small minority of families sit down for formal get-togethers.

The reasons for not conferencing are similar to those for not exercising. Conference conveners have themselves to spur into action, similar to joggers, and have to round up the rest of the family in addition. Then too, formally gathering around may feel awkward and unnatural at first. And it doesn't get any easier if people are reluctant to talk, or begin arguing back and forth.

As frustrating as these circumstances may be, the biggest factor in Conferencing's not getting established is the same as with exercise: families can survive without it. And whether they conference or not, there will always be some form of communication, be it a nod of the head from behind the newspaper, a request for the car keys, or a phone call made to an aging mother after a week of guilt-ridden putting it off.

First it's the exercising fad, and now it's Family Conferencing. Always some new gimmick to keep everybody confused. . . . . Getting vigorous exercise is new? It was a regular way of life before motorized transportation and labor saving machines came along. Now we can't even work up a tiny bit of sweat from opening up a can or carving a ham.

Having regular family meetings is not new either. Before the automobile and mass transit, before T.V. and stereo, and before highly technical breadwinner jobs which children don't understand, families did a lot more talking. Perhaps the discussions were not always democratic, and perhaps some parents had little familiarity with child psychology. But they did talk; during or after dinner, on the front porch under a moonlit sky, or while working together on the farm, in the trades, or doing crafts.

Family members used to talk more because they spent more time together, and they spent it without all the distractions we have today. So in one sense, Family Conferencing is a natural, if long lost art, and in another sense, it's an antidote for the special problems of modern society.

The biggest internal distractions for today's families are the television set and the stereo system. T.V. puts demands on the eyes and ears at the same time, making it difficult for viewers to hold much of a conversation, unless it is about the programming itself. The stereo engages only the ears, but it engages them so deafeningly that family members often find themselves screaming in order to be heard. And if the listener is using a headset, sign language may be needed.

Another communication robbing factor provided by T.V. and stereo is the length of time they are in use. In some families the tube is glowing from early morning until long after everyone is asleep. And unless the T.V. viewer has a strong interest in conversation brought up by another family member, it is easy to give monosyllabic responses while keeping the eyes glued to the set. The number of hours per week that the average home T.V. set is being gazed at is staggering, and the one hour needed for conference time is miniscule, by comparison.

While the television and stereo provide the biggest in-home roadblocks to communication, the automobile and other forms of transportation provide the biggest out-of-home ones. In times gone by, more families lived in rural areas, and even urbanites had limited travel choices. Today we live in a complex world filled with organized activities, and a great variety of means to get to them. There are club meetings, night classes, music and dance lessons, out-of-town business trips, and frantic vacations, to name a few. So some spend most of their time glued to the T.V. set, some spend most of their time on the go, and some alternate between both. All of this leaves little time for family members to have at-length or in-depth discus-

sions among themselves.

The need for more and better communication is clear. But why is Family Conferencing the best means of achieving it. Because, in almost every type of situation, it is both more efficient and more effective than other forms of dialogue.

Family Conferencing is efficient in that it gets a lot done in a short time, and requires relatively little effort in the long run. It increases the quantity and quality of family interactions, while weeding out dead-end and destructive exchanges.

Getting a lot accomplished in relatively little time does not require advanced degrees, nor does it necessitate years of practice. It comes about by keeping external distractions away, and from the dynamic nature of the group interaction.

Conversations sandwiched in at mealtimes, during T.V. viewing, while riding in the car, or when passing through the hallway, suffer many realistic distractions. And for those resistant to what is being discussed, distractions can easily be created. This common practice is exemplified by the "Excuse me, but I've got to run" spoken to a friend who is expressing annoyance, or droning on with a long, dull story. Family Conferencing can deal effectively with happenstance or created interruptions because the discussion itself is the main priority. When the phone rings during a family meeting, the caller can be told to call back, just as is done while the family is eating. And when a family member gets resistant to the discussion, it can be dealt with as part of the agenda.

Discussions involving the whole family are more dynamic than simple dialogues because a lot more is happening. As some in the group are conversing, other will become motivated to speak up, or they at least react internally. Valuable information is passed on to several people at the same time, and communicated more accurately than if it were picked up from

second or third hand telling.

Some counseling centers have solved the problem of having too many clients to see by starting groups. The often surprising result has been that not only do more persons get served, but it is with quality that is better than when they were seen individually. In ongoing groups, many participants tend to recreate their original family constellation among group members. And while this frequently produces helpful change and growth, it can never compare to the value of changing and growing from group discussions with original family members in the formative years.

Effort is needed in order to get Conferencing started and established. It requires patience and persistence on the part of the parent organizer(s), but their efforts get handsomely rewarded. People may have initial resistance to group therapy, and they often have it to family group meetings as well. But once the experience becomes routine, the sessions seem to run themselves, and parents often get pleasantly surprised when their youngsters request special meetings to deal with issues that are bothering them.

The efficiency of regular Family Conferencing can be seen in the increase in quantity and quality of family member interactions. As people feel free to open up, and get the opportunity to do this, they find themselves sharing experiences which otherwise would have been kept to themselves. And as trust builds up, there is a tendency to go into greater depth with thoughts and feelings.

Adhering to the Cornerstones of Constructive Family Living greatly enhances efficiency in communication by weeding out dead-end and destructive interactions. Family members learn practical skills for jumping off the merry-go-round of circular arguments, defusing escalated conflict, and thawing the deep freeze created in self-protective withdrawal.

The efficiency of Conferencing should be of particular interest to the working mother, who often arrives home from the job much later than

her children do from school, and then runs around feverishly to get everything done before bedtime. Many of these working mothers are single parents, and this is the group that is particularly susceptible to guilt for not giving their youngsters enough quality time.

Non-custodial parents often spend just a few hours a week or less with their children, and usually feel the need to entertain. Fitting in an hour of formal discussion makes for a good balance, in addition to being economical with time. These meetings may not deal with as many day-to-day living concerns as is the case with the custodial parent, but provide the opportunity to address broad and long range issues for everyone.

Efficiency and effectiveness form an unbeatable combination when they go hand-in-hand. The effectiveness of Family Conferencing lies in its educational value, its contributing to emotional strength and resiliency, its preventing and solving problems of day-to-day living, and its promoting of family unity.

Conferencing is an educational experience for everyone, but the greatest educational opportunity comes for children who get started at an early age. Much information is to be acquired, and there are speaking, debating, and leadership skills to be developed. But perhaps the greatest educational value of all lies in its sharpening intellectual curiosity, encouraging thinking for oneself, and demonstrating that intellectual growth is a lifelong process. Everyone is born with this inclination, and it is fostered in Family Conferencing through the free exchange of ideas, and from there being respect for everybody's opinions and feelings.

Reasonable doses of love, protection, and guidance are essential ingredients for emotional strength and resiliency. But many youngsters who have received them in abundance nevertheless develop serious emotional conflicts. Chief among the reasons for this are stifling overprotection, iron-fisted control, and reversing the dependency roles as children grow older. For

parents who are dedicated to fostering emotional strength and resiliency, yet worry about walking a thin line between neglect and over-protection, regular Family Conferencing is the perfect solution.

Parents who meet regularly with their youngsters, and experience the dynamic flow of ideas and feelings, need never worry about being labeled as "uncaring." And as they remain mindful of the Cornerstones of Constructive Family Living, unhealthy enmeshment will never be a matter of concern. The open forum atmosphere in these sessions also makes it difficult for scapegoating, manipulation, backstabbing, and other destructive systems to thrive.

Family members present professional counselors with a variety of relationship problems; for example, marital battling, adolescent rebellion, breakdown in communication, and loss of trust. These problems rarely find their solution in the offering of concrete suggestions for change. What the counselors do, instead, is to provide leadership in cutting off the crossfire, and in encouraging the family members to begin listening to one another. The situation almost always seems to improve dramatically once an honest dialogue is opened up. There is relief from the airing of feelings, satisfaction from being listened to, and greater understanding from clearing up misconceptions.

Regular Family Conferencing helps prevent and solve problems in the same fashion. The leadership for keeping honest dialogue going, however, comes from the family members themselves instead of a professional. If conflicts do get out of hand, it then becomes important to seek outside assistance. But this will happen very rarely when families stick with routine meetings and call special sessions for specific issues. This is even more the case when dialogue is democratic, when there is self-revealing without ulterior motives, when persuasiveness never includes pressure tactics, and when people are allowed and encouraged to make decisions and to

solve problems through their own initiative.

Communication itself is the solution to almost all problems of daily living within a family. It flows easily for most people when everything is fine. Then it tends to dry up or to be used as ammunition when life starts getting complicated. In problem times, honest dialogue can be painful or embarrassing, but wonders can be worked when it is kept alive.

Family unity is what all parents hope for when they start out. Its materializing in certain families is not a matter of luck, but the result of dedication and consistent effort. Family Conferencing is a natural way for developing this spirit of familyhood because it is done together as a family group. Family unity does not require everyone's thinking alike, having common goals, or always agreeing on issues. It would, in fact, be a pretty dull family in which that happened. What is important is the sharing and support that can always be present despite a variety of differences in thinking and doing.

No one enjoys going through a marital break-up, with its pain, sense of loss, and need for restructuring. Family meetings take on a special importance in these times of crisis and change, as it is easy for those affected to become withdrawn or to find scapegoats upon whom to dump their upset feelings. If issues can be aired with a reasonable degree of honesty, and if the expression of feelings is accepted and encouraged, the healing process will get a big headstart. The sense of family unity which results may be even stronger than these family members had experienced previous to the crisis.

Different issues arise when re-marriage is contemplated or undertaken, especially when there are children on each side. Even when both family units are quite stable, severe conflicts can complicate or even sabotage the merging process. This may result from such things as jealousies, competition, loss of privacy, or loss of status. In these situations, Fa-

mily Conferencing sessions can be a life saver, especially when the parents refrain from taking sides and rescuing. In almost all cases the youngsters will in time make appropriate re-adjustments, and a powerful sense of family unity will develop.

For the business of raising a family to be successful, it is important to use wise business practices. The Japanese have emerged as perhaps the best example of quality and efficiency in business operations. One of the secrets of their success has been the widespread use of the Quality Circle, which is the holding of open discussions with employees from all levels. Noting the increase in productivity and job satisfaction which results, American corporate leaders have begun following suit. And since it has proven to be a boon to the on-the-job family, perhaps the in-the-home family is next.